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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning, one of the most thoroughly researched strategies available to educators, promotes increased academic achievement and is relatively easy to implement at reasonable cost. Outcomes of cooperative learning include improved student behavior, better attendance, increased student motivation, encouragement of group processes and positive social and academic interaction among students, and rewards for successful group participation. After initial discussion of aspects of the learning strategy, this paper lists 10 steps in implementing cooperative learning activities. Concluding remarks point out that early childhood educators can use many of the strategies and activities they currently use to encourage cooperation and student interaction. Descriptions of four sample cooperative activities for young children are included in the paper. (RH)

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COOPERATIVE LEARNING:

DOES IT WORK FOR TEACHERS OF YOUNG CHILDREN?

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Cooperative learning is a teaching strategy involving students in small group learning activities that promote positive interaction. Cooperative learning is one of the most thoroughly researched strategies available to educators. Studies have consistently found that cooperative learning promotes increased academic achievement and involves relative ease of implementation and reasonable costs. Improved behavior, increased liking of class, and better attendance are also benefits of cooperative learning strategies. (Slavin, 1987)

Although much of the research on cooperative learning has been done with older students, cooperative learning should also be of interest to educators working with younger children in preschool and primary classrooms. In addition to the highly desired outcomes described, cooperative learning promotes student motivation, encourages group processes and positive social and academic interaction among students, and rewards successful group participation.

As the child first comes to a structured educational setting, the basic goal of the teacher is to help the child move from being aware only of himself or herself to being aware of other students. At this stage of learning, teachers are concerned that students learn to share, to take turns, to show caring behaviors for others. As students become aware of other students, structured activities which

promote cooperation can help to bring about these desired outcomes. One of the most consistent findings from research on cooperative learning is that cooperative learning activities increase student liking for peers, especially peers of different social and ethnic groups.

When students begin to work on readiness tasks, cooperation is also desirable. Cooperation can provide opportunities for children to share ideas, learn how others think and react to problems, and practice oral language skills in small groups. Cooperative learning in early childhood can promote positive feelings toward school, teachers, and other students which build an important base for further success in school.

According to Glasser (1986), students' motivation to work in school is dependent on the extent to which students' basic psychological needs are met. Cooperative learning increases student motivation by providing peer support for students. Students, as part of a learning team, can achieve success by working successfully with others. Students are also encouraged to learn material in greater depth and to think of creative ways to convince the teacher they have mastered required material.

Cooperative learning helps students at every academic level to feel successful and productive in class. In cooperative learning teams, low achieving students can make contributions to a group and experience success, while all

students can increase their understanding of ideas by explaining them to others. (Harvard, 1986)

Components of the cooperative learning process as described by Johnson and Johnson (1984) are complimentary to the goals of early childhood education. For example, well constructed cooperative learning tasks involve positive interdependence on others and individual accountability. To work successfully in a cooperative learning team, however, students must also master interpersonal skills needed for the group to successfully accomplish its task.

Further, cooperative learning has been shown to improve relationships between students from different ethnic backgrounds. Slavin (1980) notes: "Cooperative learning methods embody the requirements of cooperative, equal status interaction between students of different ethnic backgrounds sanctioned by the school."

For older students, traditional classroom teaching has stressed competition and individual learning for the majority of learning activities. When students are given cooperative tasks, however, learning is assessed individually, and rewards are given to the group on the basis of the group's performance, advantages of cooperative learning strategies seen most clearly. (Harvard, 1986) By beginning to teach the skills needed for group participation from the moment the child begins to come to a structured setting, the foundation for success in later learning is laid. Foyle and Lyman (1988) identify the basic steps

involved in successful implementation of cooperative learning activities:

STEPS IN COOPERATIVE LEARNING

1. The content to be taught is identified and criteria for mastery is determined by the teacher.

2. The cooperative learning technique that would be most useful for the specific objective is identified and the group size is determined by the teacher.

3. Students are assigned to groups. Heterogeneous learning groups have the most potential for success in cooperative learning as student differences make the groups work.

4. The classroom is arranged to facilitate group interaction.

5. Group processes are taught or reviewed as needed to assure that the groups run smoothly.

6. The teacher makes the expectations for the learning clear and makes sure students understand the purpose of the learning that will take place in the groups. A time line for activities is made clear to the students.

7. The teacher presents initial material as appropriate using whatever techniques (s)he chooses.

8. The teacher monitors student interaction in the groups as the students work on their tasks and provides assistance and clarification as needed. The teacher reviews group skills and facilitates problem solving as needed.

9. Student outcomes are evaluated. Students must individually demonstrate their mastery of the important skills or concepts of the learning. The evaluation may be done by observing student performance or from oral responses to questions--paper and pencil need not be used.

10. Groups are rewarded for their success. Teacher verbal praise, class newsletter, or bulletin board recognition are possible ways to reward high achieving groups.

Glasser (1986) notes: "We will not improve our schools unless we try to offer what we want to teach in a recognizably different form from the way we are presently teaching." Early childhood educators, who have the first opportunity to structure learning experiences for students, can use many of the same strategies and activities they are currently using to encourage the cooperation and student interaction that will increase the probability of student success in later schooling experiences.

Sample Cooperative Activities

Getting to Know You

Objective: Working in pairs, students will respond accurately to spoken directions.

Students will work together in pairs selected by the teacher. Their task is to listen carefully and do what the teacher says.

A. Visual Discrimination

Directions: Tell students to stand up if their partner is wearing:

1. something red
2. something blue
3. something green
4. something yellow
5. shoes with white on them
6. a shirt with a picture on it
7. a shirt with buttons on it
8. something in their hair

B. Interaction

Directions: Tell students they will need to ask their partner to find out whether or not to stand up for each of the questions. Tell them to stand if their partner:

1. has a dog
2. has a cat
3. has a brother
4. has a sister
5. had cereal for breakfast
6. watched TV before school this morning
7. walked to school this morning
8. likes chocolate milk
9. likes to play outside
10. likes to come to school

Working for Peanuts

Objective: Students will practice counting skills in pairs.
Students will practice spatial relationship vocabulary words in pairs. (on, off; above, below)

Materials: Drawing of elephant (see figure 1)
5 syrofoam "peanuts" (or construction paper "peanuts")

Note: During the activity, each pair of students should have only one elephant and 5 peanuts to share. Each child may later be given an elephant to color if desired.

Tell students they will be working in pairs to feed the elephant. You will tell them how many peanuts to give the elephant each time they feed it. They will take turns feeding the elephant by putting peanuts on the drawing. Their partner will check to see they have the correct number of peanuts.

1. one peanut
2. three peanuts
3. two peanuts
4. no peanuts (The elephant is not feeling well.)
5. five peanuts
6. four peanuts

To practice vocabulary words:

1. one peanut on the elephant
2. two peanuts off the elephant
3. one peanut on the elephant, one peanut off the elephant
4. two peanuts on the elephant, two peanuts off
5. three peanuts on, one peanut off
6. two peanuts on, three peanuts off

(change order of words)

7. three peanuts off the elephant, one peanut on
8. four peanuts off the elephant, one peanut on
9. one peanut off the elephant, no peanuts on
10. no peanuts off the elephant, two peanuts on

"above" and "below" may be substituted for "on" and "off" (example: one peanut above the elephant, one below)

Group reward: Peanuts or a peanut butter cookie can serve as a reward following the activity.

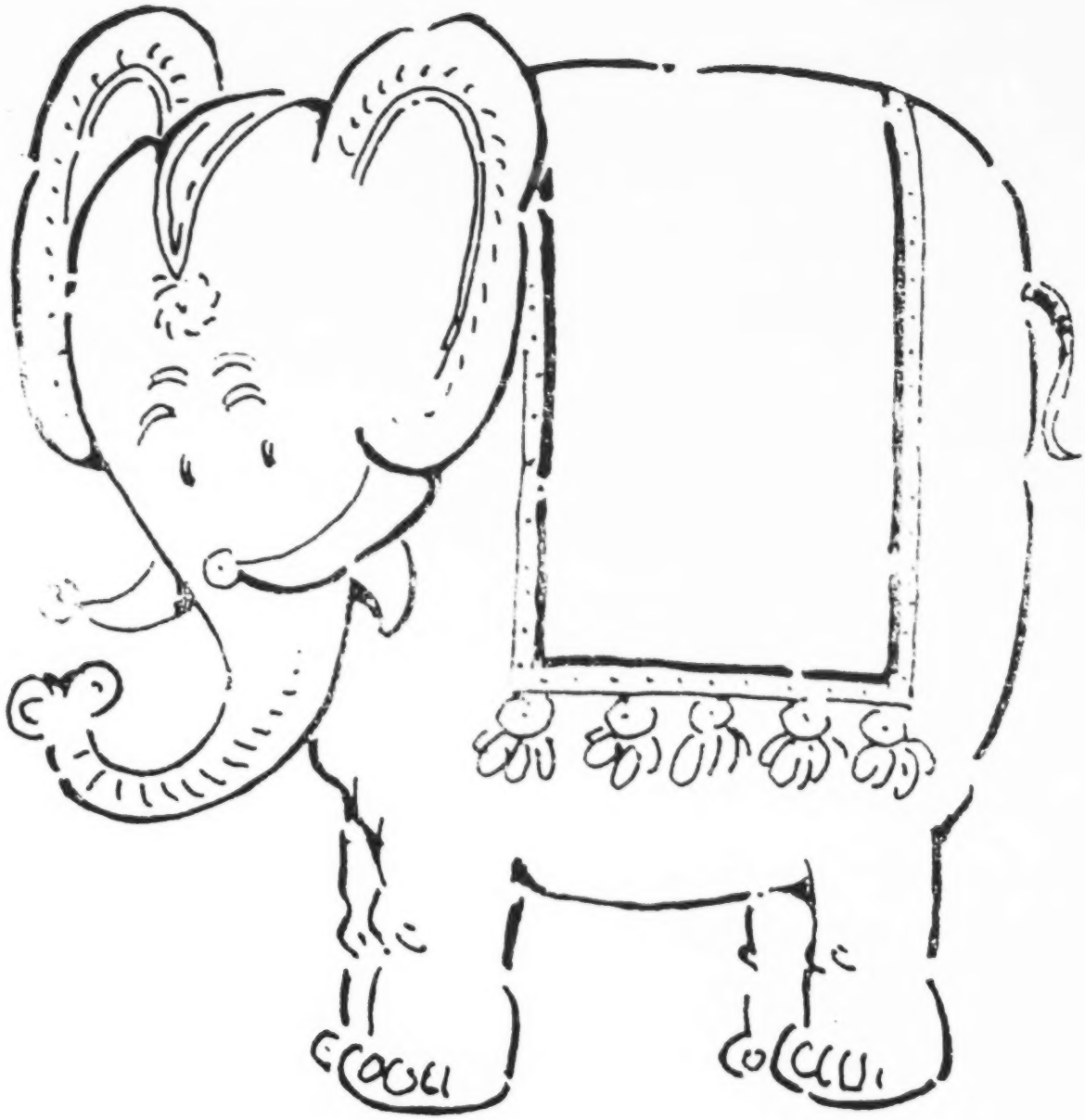

Figure 1: Elephant for Math Exercise

Cooperative Pumpkins

Objective: Practice cutting skills, review body parts (eyes, nose, mouth) while cooperatively designing a Halloween pumpkin. (see figure 2 for pattern)

Students are grouped in threes. Each group is given a pumpkin. Students are given numbers by the teacher (1, 2, and 3).

Student # 1 begins cutting out the pumpkin. After a short interval of time, student # 2 should have a turn cutting out the pumpkin. Student # 3 should cut the dotted lines. All students should have approximately the same amount of time to cut as others in their group.

Student #1 should take the top of the pumpkin (with the stem). They are responsible for putting eyes on their part and decorating the part they have.

Student # 2 should take the middle part of the pumpkin. They are responsible for putting a nose on the pumpkin and decorating the part they have.

Student # 3 should take the bottom part of the pumpkin. They are responsible for putting a mouth on the pumpkin and decorating the part they have.

After students finish, have them put the parts of their pumpkin together and compare the results. The teacher may have students take the portion of the pumpkin they made to new groups and put together new pumpkins. Completed pumpkins can be displayed on a bulletin board or hung from the ceiling (pasting one group's pumpkin on the back of another creates a nice mobile effect).

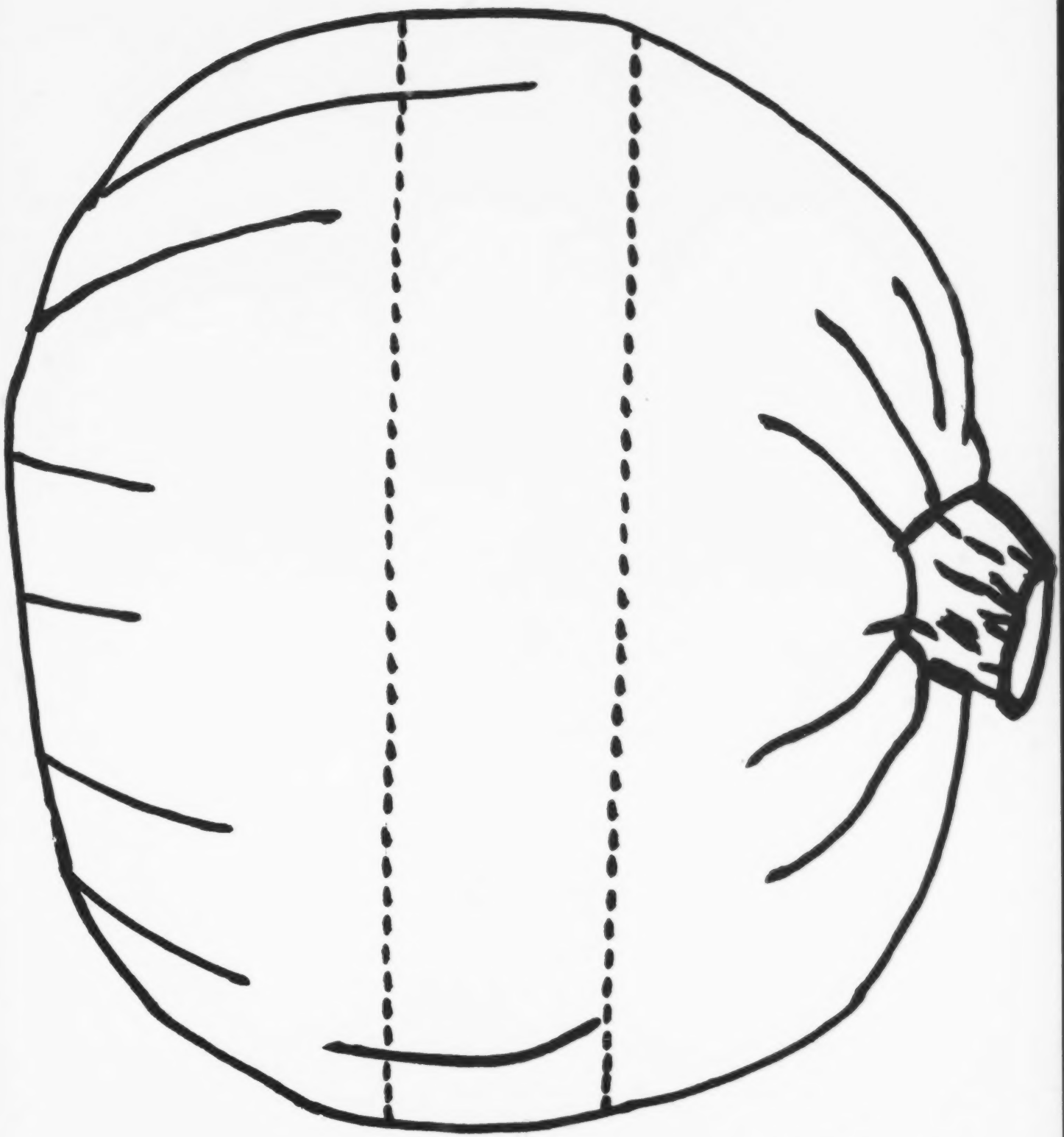

Figure 2: Pattern for Cooperative Pumpkin

Shape Up

Objective: Students will practice recognizing basic shapes groups of three. Pairs may be used for activities one and two.

Each group receives one set of shape cards (see figure 3). The cards can be pre-cut and mixed or students can cut them out and mix them up. Cards are placed face down in the middle of the group.

Activity 1: Circle Hunt

Each student checks the cards as they are turned over, looking for circles. Circle cards are placed in one pile, all other cards placed in another. When finished, students count the number of circle cards they found. (3 is correct)

Activity 2: Circle or Square?

One student is designated as the "Circle Hunter", one as the "Square Hunter", one as the "Counter". Cards are turned over. Circle Hunter collects all circle cards. Square Hunter collects all square cards. Counter collects all other cards. When finished, counter counts number of cards he/she has (6 is correct). Circle and square hunter should have 3 cards each.

Activity 3: Circle, Square, Triangle

One student is the "Circle Hunter", one the "Square Hunter", and one is the "Triangle Hunter". Each collects the cards they are looking for, other cards are returned to the bottom of the pile. When finished, have each count cards. (Each should have found three cards, and there should be three cards left in the middle).

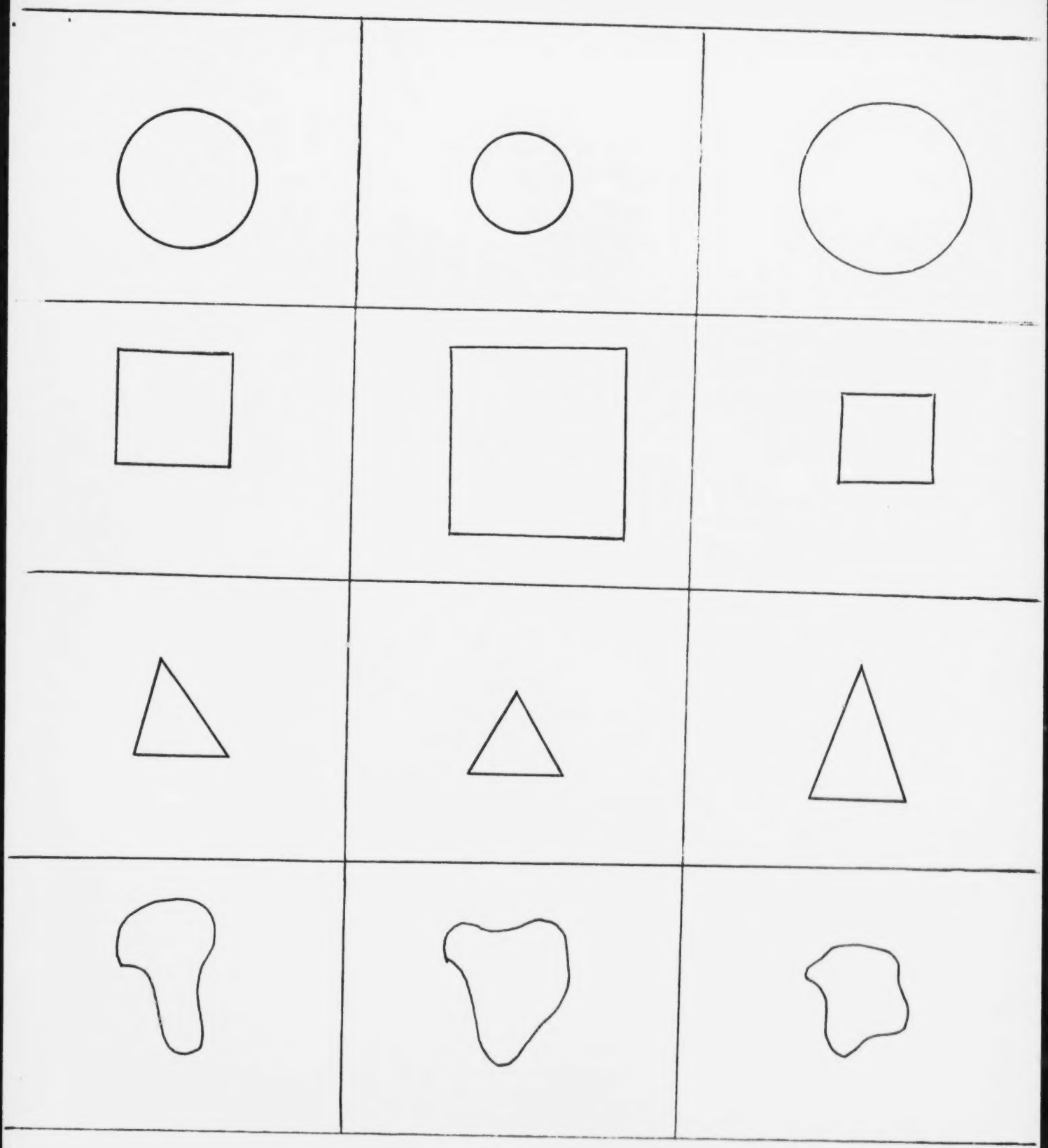

Figure 3: Cards for Shape Exercise

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